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## **Seeing, Hearing and Feeling: How Can a Visit to Auschwitz Encourage Young People to Practise Citizenship?**

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### **Abstract**

*In 2005 the first national educational visit to Auschwitz took place for Scottish pupils aged between 16-17 years. This study examines the impact this had on pupils in Fife Region, the third largest local authority in Scotland. Soon after this visit, pupils formed 'The Auschwitz Experience Group', and over a year organised the 'Anne Frank and You Festival', a large scale community initiative that focused on citizenship issues. The research sought pupil feedback on the educational visit and identified key issues of importance for teachers and cultural managers who work alongside education services.*

### **Introduction**

Auschwitz is the ultimate symbol of the Holocaust and to many people the words Holocaust and Auschwitz are synonymous (Woolaston, 1996). Garside considers that a visit to Auschwitz will link the genocide of Jews and the murder of other European citizens to present day genocide (Garside, 2008). Educational school visits to Poland have been organized and subsidized by the Holocaust Educational Trust, London (HET) since 1999 (Holocaust Educational Trust, 2006) and are now part of the Lessons from Auschwitz (LFA) project, but due to financial constraints and difficulties in accessibility, only a small number of Scottish pupils has been able to participate in this project. Having taken part in the LFA project and been convinced of its value to school students, Jim Murphy and Ken Macintosh (respectively Member of Parliament and Member of Scottish Parliament for East Renfrewshire), in conjunction with the Holocaust Educational Trust, facilitated a similar visit for students and teachers in Scotland in 2005 which addressed accessibility issues. This visit was the first Scottish schools' day visit to Auschwitz. This research examines the impact this visit had on one Scottish authority.

### **Research into school visits to Auschwitz**

Research in this area provides diverse views as to the value of Holocaust museums in general as an educational resource for young people. Short and Reed express their reservations by stating that museums can reinforce or fail to challenge stereotypes, and by their possible presentation of 'a sanitized account of their own country's record on anti-Semitism and particularly its response to the victims of Nazism' (Short and Reed 2004, p104). Blum shares Short and Reed's criticisms and states that in 1989 the Auschwitz- Birkenau Memorial Museum (ABMM) neither adequately recognized the distinctive fate of Jews and Gypsies /Roma as ethnic groups targeted for extermination nor clearly explained that an attempted genocide of the Jews had taken place (Blum, 2004). This misleading information, according to Blum 'distorted the presentation of the Polish experience of the Nazi period' (Blum, 2004 p133). On his return to the ABMM in

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2003, Blum recognized that the genocide of the Jews had been clearly included in the museum and presented as a universal concern. However his comments on the guide's knowledgeable yet mechanical manner which was not conducive to audience discussion, suggests that Short and Reed's sanitized claim may be relevant today.

Oleksy makes two claims about young visitors to the ABMM (Oleksy in Davies, 2000). Firstly that because today's young visitors were born decades after the Second World War, the place where young visitors come from determines what Auschwitz means to them. It follows that if Holocaust education differs across countries because of each country's or people's different political history (Miles, 2004; Lipstadt, 2005; Gates, 2006) ; culture (Alexander, 2002); anti-Semitism and extent of collaboration or resistance during the Second World War (Gundare and Batelaan, 2003) then the impact of visiting the ABMM will vary likewise. Secondly, is Oleksy's claim that it is essential that young visitors have knowledge to prepare them for this visit as it is 'probably the most emotionally charged place on earth' (Davies, 2000, p83).

Novick (1999) questions the impact that Holocaust museums have on active citizenship by recalling the dedication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum by the former US President Clinton (1993). While Clinton publicly expressed that during the Holocaust 'far too little was done' (1993), the USA did not intervene in the Rwandan genocide that took place the following year.

Current research into the educational visits to ABMM focus on issues surrounding this experience within the context of Israeli youth (Lazar et al, 2004; Schechter and Salomon, 2005; Romi and Lev, 2007). Their visit to ABMM differs to the LFA project in that it is part of a longer experiential learning programme in Poland which last several days. Criticisms of this programme that are relevant to the UK/ Scottish model are that too much time is devoted to ceremonies and that the journey is no more than 'a pilgrimage to the death camps' (Romi and Lev, *ibid*).

While school visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau resonate through UK schools, and the media (Copley, 2005; Walker, 2006; Macleod, 2007), there is little documented evidence of the impact this has on pupils in the UK. North Lanarkshire Council included the 2005 visit as a component of their *Try2gether Religious Intolerance Initiative*, the aim of which was to raise awareness of religions, promote dialogue among pupils from different faiths and highlight the consequences of racial and religious intolerance (North Lanarkshire, 2006). It reported that the visit impacted on their pupils with two of their three Muslim pupils being unaware of what had taken place at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and one of these commenting that prior to the visit, he had not been fully convinced that what he had heard about the Holocaust was true, but as a result of the visit had changed his view (Cowan, 2008).

This small-scale study aims to gain a better understanding of how a visit to ABMM can create impact and examines pupil feedback to identify factors that encourage, facilitate and/or hinder this impact in relation to active citizenship.

## Method

### *Sample and General Procedure*

The 2005 Scottish schools' visit to Auschwitz attracted pupils from 17 of the 32 local authorities in Scotland. Unlike the LFA programme that limits its participants to two students from each school, organizers permitted schools to send more than two students. The research sample came from Fife Council whose participants were nine students - all girls- and two teachers.

Agreement to participate in the study was first obtained from the Council and then from the students themselves. Although seven of the nine students initially agreed to be interviewed for this study, only five did so. Participants were from three different schools and consisted of four sixth year students (17-18 yrs) and one fifth year student (16-17 yrs). Prior to the interview, students received a general explanation regarding the purpose of the study. While this was a female sample, data obtained from HET and the organizers of the Scottish visit showed that the gender composition of the 2005 Scottish cohort was typical of LFA groups by comprising of 66% female students and 34% male students.

Interviews took place almost two years after the schools' visit to Auschwitz. By this time students were over 18 years, had left school and were either at university or in vocational training. This sample was selected because of the Council's original approach to Holocaust education which had led to a dynamic three-week community programme entitled the *Anne Frank + You Festival (AFYF)* in 2007 in which Fife students who had visited Auschwitz in 2005, had helped to create. This Festival attracted 8,000 visitors and led to Fife Council hosting the Scottish National Holocaust Memorial Day event in that year (Fife Council, 2007).

This study examines the contribution of the schools' visit to Auschwitz to this programme by obtaining feedback from pupils; and examining the minutes of planning meetings to gain insight into the contribution and participation of the students.

### *Methodological Considerations*

The principal interests were to find out if the visit to Auschwitz had impact on school students and if so to identify the types of impact that existed. On a one-to- one basis student respondents were asked the same set of questions. Questions were categorized under the following headings:

- *Student background*- This covers their previous school/communal involvement and prior interest of the Holocaust and World War Two.
- *Impact of the visit*. This covers personal impact in terms of intellectual growth and knowledge; and impact on the school and/or community.

Interviews were recorded and participants read their transcripts for accuracy and amended them where appropriate. Interview duration varied from 45 mins. to 1 hour.

The time lapse between the visit and the interviews may be considered as a limitation of this study in that students' immediate responses were not recorded. However in focusing on the longer term impact it can be argued that these students are less likely to try to please the interviewer as they have left school, gained maturity and that their feedback is more reflective than had it been recorded immediately after the schools' visit.

It would have been beneficial to have included feedback from the teachers who accompanied students. Due to financial and time restraints it was not possible to do so and the researcher recognizes that this and the small size of this sample are limitations of this research. In addition, due to time availability, one participant was not asked the full set of questions. Nonetheless the feedback obtained from this study contributes to understanding student, school and community impact of a schools' visit to Auschwitz.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Student Background*

At the time of the visit the cohort of five students were studying History at either Higher or Advanced Higher levels (equivalent to AS and 'A' levels in England) and were asked to go on the visit either by their Rector, and/or Head of History and/or History teacher. One school had an open list for students and students whose names were at the top of the list were asked first. This student cohort was not necessarily the teachers' first choice as one student reported that

*one of the first girls they chose did not want to participate and did not do history;*

or the keenest of students as another student commented

*One girl was cross that she was not asked...and another boy who didn't do history was disappointed (that he was not asked) as he wanted to go.*

It is likely that boys who would have liked to have participated in the visit could not do so because they were not studying History as this was a criteria by which pupils were chosen. Discussion with participants about the gender imbalance of the Fife sample provided insight into young people's attitudes about this visit and its accompanying follow-up requirements. One student commented that the visit was seen by young people as a

*geeky / not cool thing to want to do, [and conceded that] there are boys out there who see it as really good but do not have the courage to come and say I'll go*

because of peer pressure. Another student suggested that boys would be interested if the Holocaust had been taught at an earlier stage at school using more interactive approaches.

The visit was initially aimed at 6<sup>th</sup> year students but one school allowed two fifth year students to participate as students had dropped out. One of these was student 5 who stated that she and her school companion, who barely knew each other, found the visit difficult because her peers were older and accompanied by their teacher. This suggests a

requirement for schools and organizers to consider students' needs and justifies an orientation input prior to the visit, as included in the LFA programme.

Reasons for participating in this visit were varied and included it being:

*an amazing opportunity*  
*a reward for all my hard work*  
*a help with my study of history.*

Four participants had been involved in aspects of school life, eg. members of Fife schools / pupil council, peer support, singing in school show, assisting in History club; and one participant had been involved in the wider communal involvement by recording for the Fife newspaper for the blind. Therefore it was evident that teachers had chosen responsible students to represent their schools on this visit.

Four participants had a particular interest in history with three students focusing their interest on Germany or the Holocaust. They rated their Holocaust knowledge between 5 and 8 (with the maximum being 10), with one stating that she had studied Anne Frank at primary school while another had previously visited Dachau and Anne Frank House with her parents. This raises the issue as to whether students who participate in such visits are the students who would benefit the most by such an experience. Student 4 had no particular interest in the Holocaust and rated her knowledge between 3 and 4. This suggests that although students studied History, not all were necessarily prepared with adequate knowledge of the Holocaust as Oleksy claims is important in this visit (Davies, 2000). Prior the visit in 2005, none of these students had been aware of Holocaust Memorial Day.

### ***Student Impact***

#### *(i) Intellectual Growth*

##### *Understanding of the Holocaust*

One student perceived that the visit had no effect on her knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. Other students perceived that their knowledge had increased. Student 1 who had rated herself 8 prior to the visit commented that her knowledge of the Holocaust had not increased in terms of general facts but from 'the human point of view' as being in Auschwitz conveyed the 'feeling' of the Holocaust that school and other resources could not achieve. Student 2 who had rated herself 5 admitted that she had thought she was going to Germany and was shocked to find out that Auschwitz was in Poland.

##### *Understanding of Anti-Semitism*

Students' feedback on their perceived knowledge and understanding of anti-Semitism was varied. Student 1 conveyed a confusion between anti-Semitism and multiculturalism which implied a lack of understanding of anti-Semitism.

[Town where participant lives] *has a low knowledge of different cultures. It's becoming more now with Muslim children but there are no Jews in [town].*

Student 3 commented that her understanding was unchanged. The remaining three students perceived a change in their understanding of anti-Semitism and recognized that anti-Semitism existed in today's Scotland and the UK.

#### *Holocaust Reading*

Three participants had engaged in preparatory reading prior to the visit. One of whom stated after the visit that there was so much more that she needed to know about the Holocaust. Student 2 considered that she now knew a lot more about the Holocaust than most people of her age. The remaining student, student 4 engaged in Holocaust reading after the visit and at the time of the interviews, had continued to read the literature related to the visit. She commented,

*It wasn't till coming back home that you realized how big it was, 'cos two pages that's what I was used to – two pages of a text book, that's all it was.*

#### *(ii) A Life Changing Experience*

Due to time restrictions, Student 3 was not asked this question.

The following quotations demonstrate that other students considered the visit to be a life-changing experience for them in different ways. This supports the view of Jim Murphy who stated in his interview that this experience had the potential to '*shape their values and influence their important decisions in life.*'

*This visit slammed my brakes and pulled me back to reality.* Student 1

*It's really hard to put into words how much it affects you.....you don't realise how much it does until you come across a situation where you might have been passive before and then you feel like 'that's not right- I'm going to do something something.* Student 2

*I was going to go abroad to a developing nation and help there. The visit to Auschwitz made me more aware of discrimination and then later of how crime is involved in this.. I've gone from thinking life is brilliant in Britain to realizing that there is a lot of darkness. You don't need to go to a developing country to see it. [This student has since changed her career choice and her work is community based.]* Student 4

*I think my confidence has improved.....I know where people are coming from when they say that holocausts are going on today but it's different. Going to Auschwitz has made me realise how significant the Holocaust was and I don't agree with them.* Student 5

#### *(iii) School and Community Involvement*

Variations in individual levels of student school and community involvement can be explained by the older students leaving school and their community. All students attended the first meetings of the Auschwitz Experience Group which discussed ways of generating interest in the Holocaust and Holocaust-related issues, to a wider school audience. Prior to 2006 the schools had not commemorated HMD.

Student 1 was planning to use something from the visit for her Advanced Higher English Folio but did not do so. She spoke about the visit at assemblies to year groups.

Student 2 worked collaboratively with three students on a Powerpoint presentation for the school but due to timetabling was unable to present it to students. She presented it to an audience of Fife students and teachers who went on the visit, and a member of the Creative Links Team. This student stated that she was now more willing to participate in communal activities and planned to stand as class representative at university.

Student 3 contributed to her school's assembly for Holocaust Memorial Day 2006 but due to illness was unable to attend.

Student 4 spoke to year groups and adapted the content of her talks to suit students of different ages. She intuitively wanted to connect with her audiences and arranged these independently without teacher support. This student raised a number of points at the first meetings of the Auschwitz Experience Group as she was insistent that whatever they were going to deliver was not to be 'wordy' and 'go right over their [students'] heads'. She advocated for workshops that allowed young people to talk and practical activities. Student 4 became Chair of the Auschwitz Experience Group and after leaving school, liaised between the young people in schools and the professional adults in the Creative Links Team to develop the AFYF. Before leaving school she facilitated the 6<sup>th</sup> year students into speaking to 5<sup>th</sup> year students and inviting them onto the AEG to ensure continuity.

Student 5 contributed significantly to the AFYF as she remained at school during this time. Her school organized a debate on the effects of technology on conflict headed by Prof Heinz Wolff for the school and wider community. She and her school companion (who had gone on the visit), with teacher assistance, brought five students from different year groups together to organize their event. Some of these students were younger and were either interested in history or in business as these skills were considered to be important in event management. Student 5 also spoke to the national press about her visit to Auschwitz, appeared on national (UK) television to generate interest in the AFYF, and participated in the Scottish HMD ceremony in 2005. This student stated that she while she may not live up to this communal involvement, she would continue 'spreading the word' about the lessons of the Holocaust.

## Conclusions

In conclusion student impact of the visit to Auschwitz was varied and distinctive, although one student reported that the visit had no impact on her. This study shows that schools selected pupils who they knew to be effective representatives for their school; and suggests that students' needs in respect of their age, teacher accompaniment and friendship with their co-school participant may also affect the impact of this experience.

Impact on students' personal growth was also variable. Some students perceived significant gains in their understanding of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism but others perceived that no gain had occurred at all. Four of the five students perceived that the

visit had a personal emotional impact on them and considered the experience to be life changing.

The impact on schools and the community was significant, though it relied upon the senior students enrolling younger students to ensure continuity of their work. Students gave talks at assemblies to year groups. It is likely that the success of the AFYF influenced the impact of the visit on pupils as it generated ideas, collaborations with people and public interest. However its success was largely due to the input of the students who went on the visit to Auschwitz and so in this sense the visit contributed greatly to students' practising active citizenship.

Further examination of the development of the AEG and the input of professionals from the Creative Links Community Services will provide further insight into the impact of the visit to Auschwitz on this cohort. With Scottish schools' visits to Auschwitz having taken place under the LFA project (2007), larger- scale research into this would ascertain whether this impacts on Scotland's students in terms of their active citizenship and their future.

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